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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the problems of the second-year intermediate college language course, the principles that are fundamental to any intermediate class and observations on the content of the course. The limitations imposed by time, the scope of the subject matter, and the varied capabilities and interests of the students constitute the Special problems of this course. The following principles should form the core for the intermediate year: (1) The course must be based on the language itself; it must reinforce and increase the student's knowledge of the language in a systematic way. (2) The course must contribute to the student's liberal education. (3) The student must learn to appreciate the fact that language is an instrument of communication. (4) The student must learn that language can be of practical use. The content of the course follows from the foregoing principles. Basic components of the course include emphasis on correct usage, especially of verbs and idiomatic expressions, study of the culture of the country, and the use of a wide variety non-fictional and fictional materials, audio-visual materials and visits from native speakers. Such a carefully organized intermediate course can turn the problem year into one of solid and stimulating achievement (AMH)

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The Problem Year: Rationales and Remedies[1]

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Most of us recognize that the very nature of the second-year intermediate course is complex and constitutes a problem that may never be solved. The second year is a period of transition, a no-man's land lying somewhere between complete ignorance of and reasonable mastery of the Italian language. Like all transitional periods, it is a time of uncertainty, for the instructor as well as for the student. The student who appears in the second-year language course is very different from what he or she was a year earlier. As a freshman, he was naive in the ways of academia, awestruck at being in college, eager to please and to succeed, charmed a bit, perhaps, by the novelty of the Italian language, and immensely gratified, when he realized that by learning three or four new foreign words he had doubled his vocabulary.

Not so the second-year student. After a year of hard work he knows that he still can speak and understand the language only imperfectly, and what he has forgotten during the summer has contributed to his ignorance. He feels frustrated because his desire to communicate far outstrips his ability to do so. Most

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devastating, he has probably begun to question exactly what he wants to get out of his language study, and he may have come to the conclusion that he simply wants to get out of it.

The homogeneous class that faced the instructor the previous year has disappeared. In its place is a group of students who vary greatly in their abilities, their interests, and their reasons for taking Italian. Some want merely to satisfy the college's requirements, others hope to use their language skills with friends and family, or in business or research or to complement their courses in art and music, or perhaps to make an upcoming trip to Europe more enjoyable. To which group is the instructor to direct his teaching?

This is one of the problems facing the teacher in the intermediate year. There are, of course, many others, most of which are beyond the control of the instructor. One problem, however, can be at least partly attributed to the teacher and to what can be called the "Sunday night syndrome." We all know what that is. I usually experience it weekly when, after having either frittered away my weekend or used it to accomplish more pressing or interesting tasks, I am suddenly seized on Sunday night by the realization that the next day is going to be Monday, just like it was last week, and I race to begin preparing for classes. Similarly, as the instructor returns from the second or third meeting of his intermediate class, he is stung by his professional conscience. "My God," he says to himself, "time is running out. For most of these students, this is their last year of Italian! And they know almost nothing!" He feverishly revises his syllabus:

"more work on the subjunctive and more exercises on double object pronouns, because they don't understand those at all; I know they don't know who Mazzini was; maybe I can show them a Fellini film, and my slides of the Sistine Chapel; and they've got to be warned about pappagalli and the letter C on faucets in Italy. And Gadda! Oh my God, I almost forgot Gadda; they've got to get Gadda!" This is the blithering stage of the syndrome. Unless at this point the instructor can shake his panic and take stock of the limitations imposed upon him by time, the capabilities of his students, and the material with which he must work, he will become his own enemy, exhausting himself without achieving any of the goals he strives for.

Thus, I perceive the central problem of the intermediate year as the problem of what to choose to teach in a very limited time to a group of students who differ greatly in their needs, abilities, attitudes, and interests. The problem is admittedly broad, and it becomes even more unwieldy when we consider the different language requirements, the different college calendars, and the different structures of second-year courses, all of which vary from institution to institution. It should by now be obvious to all that the central problem of the intermediate year cannot be solved by theorizing or generalizing. That is, no single course syllabus will be appropriate for all second-year courses.

On the other hand, there are certain principles that I consider fundamental to any intermediate class and which constitute what we may call the rationale for the intermediate year.

One principle is self-evident. The course must be based upon the language itself, it must reinforce and increase the student's knowledge of Italian in a systematic way. For this reason, the language text that reviews and also deepens the student's knowledge of the language will be the basic text of the course.

The second principle of the intermediate year is a traditional one: the course must contribute to the student's liberal education; he must perceive that the language is a vehicle--and in some cases the origin and the product--of the culture of a nation, and this culture should be represented by its most worthy achievements, by the best of its thought and art and music and especially literature. What Italians eat and how much a train ticket from Milan to Rome costs have their importance. But neither is a substitute for a poem by Montale or a page of Machiavelli.

These first two principles--the study of the language and its culture--should form the core of the intermediate year. Yet if we limit our course to them, we shall run the risk of distorting the student's conception of language and language learning, for language is more than grammar and literature. It is omnipresent, and it touches every aspect of human behavior. It is not a problem to be "worked" by filling in the right blank but an instrument of communication between living human beings. Language is real, and the student must be convinced of its reality. This is our third principle.

Closely related to this principle but distinct from it is the notion that the language can be of use, of practical use to the student--it is not something dreamed up by insensitive or possibly

even sadistic educators for the sole purpose of tormenting the student.

The rationale, then, that supports the intermediate course consists of increasing the students' knowledge of the language and its culture, and at the same time imparting to them the notions that language is both real and useful. The next question is: "how?". From the almost infinite aspects of language and the vast number of cultural works, which will we choose to present to the students? How can we demonstrate to them that language is real and useful?

Our approach to the teaching of language should be guided by the realization that the intermediate year is the last year in which most students will formally study Italian. Accordingly, we should emphasize those elements of language which are best learned in the classroom; for example, verbs and idiomatic expressions. The many irregular verbs pose special problems for the student of Italian, not only because of their number but also because their conjugated forms are not listed alphabetically in dictionaries and other reference works. Similarly, idiomatic expressions are often hard to find in dictionaries; but what is even more confusing to the student is the fact that many idioms are composed of words familiar to the student, while the sense of the idioms may be quite different from the literal meaning of the individual words. Special attention to verbs and idioms yields important dividends: not only does the student increase his quantitative knowledge of the language but he also lays down

a firm base upon which he can increase that knowledge when he is no longer enrolled in an Italian class.

Acquainting the student with the culture of Italy is done most satisfactorily by means of the literary text, because most cultural phenomena are stored in and transmitted by the written word. This is ideal for the teacher of language, because the reading of a text transmits information on the culture of Italy and at the same time it contributes to and reinforces knowledge of the language itself. Unfortunately, what students read in intermediate courses is usually limited to imaginative literature--short stories, a novel, a play, some poetry. I would propose the widest possible variety of readings: imaginative literature, certainly, but also some essays which will reveal the thought of Italians in different historical periods. We cannot hope to teach an intellectual history of Italy; our readings would have to be very selective. But I think it would be enlightening for students to read some of Verdi's letters or a portion of Leonardo's notebooks, each accompanied by either a brief lecture or additional readings on the author's contribution to western civilization.

Many intermediate language courses go no farther than the point we have reached: they consist of grammar review and readings from Italy's luminaries. In an extreme (and admittedly exaggerated) situation, a student might leave second-year Italian with the conviction that "Italian" is a puzzle in which a masculine singular article matches up with a masculine singular noun followed by a verb whose number must match the number of the noun and which is in turn followed by another noun, possibly

preceded by a preposition, and that there once lived people called Pirandello and Ungaretti who were very good at this sort of thing, and that's why we study them in Italian class.

Such a sterile view of the language must be combatted, not only for the good of our profession but especially for the good of our students. The student must be taught that Italian is a reality, that for millions of people it is a way of living, it is as much the stuff of reality as English is the stuff of reality for him.

The teaching of "reality" consists of introducing the student to material that was not created or prepared specifically for the teaching of Italian. For the spoken language, a museum tour accompanied by an Italian-speaking guide or a visit to the shop of an Italian artisan would probably be more productive than an hour in the classroom. Some communities have radio and television programs in Italian. Even in geographical areas where spoken Italian is not common, some exposure to "real" Italian can usually be arranged through films, short-wave radio broadcasts, or records of Italian popular songs.

Written materials and exercises can also heighten the student's sense of Italian as a "real" language. Articles extracted and photocopied from current newspapers and periodicals are useful <u>if</u> they can be related to something with which the student is familiar, e.g., an article about some aspect of America or about some event familiar to most of the students. I have in mind, for example, articles on American foreign policy, drug problems, unemployment, energy conservation, or pollution

control. To complement an article on American unemployment, for instance, the instructor might also assign an article on Italian employment. Not all materials need be at a high intellectual level: an article on the death of Elvis Presley would probably be read avidly and would add a certain dimension to the student's perception of real Italian. Likewise, comic strips, cartoons, and fotoromanzi have not only a curiosity value but also reflect Italian popular culture; in addition, they offer excellent examples of contemporary spoken language.

The intermediate student thus exposed to contemporary materials which set into relief both the differences and the similarities between Italian and American cultures will, I think, come to realize that Italian is not just an academic exercise foisted upon him by a tradition-bound educational system. He or she will find that Italian is a living language which can be an instrument of knowledge, communication, and even pleasure.

To satisfy the final principle of our rationale, the instructor must guide the student toward the realization that a knowledge of Italian can be useful even after the completion of formal language study. It is in this area that intermediate programs are probably most deficient. We too frequently regard only the student who will go on to the third year as having a future in which Italian will play any role; the student who does not continue after the second year is dismissed from our minds with only a slight feeling of gratitude for his having contributed one more enrollment and thus kept the wolf from the door for a while longer. We assume too readily that once students leave

intermediate Italian they will never "do" anything with it; it is likely that they never will, unless we prepare them to use their language skills.

This preparation can be carried out on both the individual and the group levels. To the individual, the instructor may assign an article dealing with a field in which the student is interested. I would caution the instructor not to limit choices to an academic field: few second-year students can profit from a highly technical professional article in psychology or chemistry or history. And the choice of the article should be dictated by the student's interest. If that interest at the moment runs to automobiles or rock music rather than nuclear particles and the logistics of the Peloponnesian War, fine. During the student's reading of the article, the instructor should be available for consultation. When he has finished his reading, the student might then make a written or an oral report on what he has learned.

Happily, most efforts toward showing the usefulness and future potential of the language can be directed toward the class as a whole. One can invite to class adults who use Italian in their daily lives: a translator, a person in business, a colleague from another department, a librarian, a social worker, or a tourist agent. Nor should we overlook those whose avocations frequently involve foreign language: history or music or art buffs, and the amateur of languages who studies them for personal enjoyment or for travel. Such persons, although they may not be masters in the language, should speak Italian informally with the

students. In fact, it may be desirable for the student to realize that even an imperfect command of the language can be a useful tool, although mastery, of course, is more advantageous still.

Finally, the instructor can provide the student with certain skills and aids that will be useful after the formal study of Italian has ended. Toward the end of the second year the instructor should introduce the student to various dictionaries and give instruction in their proper use. Bilingual dictionaries ought to be given the most attention, because the student is most likely to use these in the future. Differences between pocket, desk-sized, and standard dictionaries should be demonstrated, perhaps by comparing a single entry in the three sizes. Not only should the student be warned of the pitfalls lurking in bilingual dictionaries, but he should also be taught how to avoid them--by consulting a standard dictionary of the Italian language. The student who knows how to use dictionaries will be more likely to use them in the future--and less likely to use them incorrectly.

As the student leaves the intermediate class, he should take with him a rudimentary "handbook" provided by the instructor. Part of such a booklet would be bibliographical: a list of the better Italian-English and Italian-Italian dictionaries, the titles of two or three reference grammars, and some suggested further reading, perhaps graded according to relative difficulty. The list of readings need not be lengthy but it should be so designed as to appeal to a wide variety of tastes. Another section of the booklet ought to list local and national bookstores where Italian publications can be obtained; similarly, local

public libraries with Italian collections--however small--should be mentioned, as well as the fact that many college and university libraries permit the use of their holdings even to persons who have no official connection with the institution. Finally, cultural organizations such as the Società Dante Alighieri should be brought to the student's attention.

We must have no illusion that following such a program in the intermediate year will cause a great rush on bookstores and libraries. Many and probably even most students will not use their Italian after completing the language requirement. Nevertheless, a concerted effort by the instructor during the intermediate year will increase the number of students who can, after leaving the classroom, benefit from their language study.

The intermediate year has always been the problem year. Standing as it does between the pedagogical simplicity of the elementary course and the specialization found in advanced courses, the second year is critical, it is a pivotal year. In some ways, it is the cardinal link existing in the present between the past and the future. We can present to the student a worthwhile and useful course if we keep in mind this peculiar quality of the intermediate year. Accordingly, we shall give the student as firm a grounding in the language as we can, we shall introduce him to some of the important and representative achievements of Italy in the past, we shall acquaint him with the reality of present-day Italian, and we shall prepare him to make further use of his knowledge in the future. If we can do this, then the intermediate year will no longer be the problem year but the year of solid and stimulating achievement.